

Bards with Class

By Skip Williams



Bards are often depicted as ne'er-do-wells and charlatans who prefer not to meet challenges head on. A character who fits that stereotype can be fun, but a bard also can function as a person of deep knowledge and wide experience, a folk hero, a slumming aristocrat, or a general handyman.

The Pros and Cons of a Bard

A bard most often exercises his true strength through others. He also has abilities and spells that provide information, or that serve some other utilitarian function.

Bard Assets

When you chose a bard, you gain access to a substantial array of magical abilities, most of which influence other creatures. Below are several assets you have going for you when you play a bard.

- **Good Skill Points:** With 6 skill points per level, a bard with a decent Intelligence score can buy plenty of skill ranks.
- **Good Skill Selection:** The bard has a substantial list of class skills. Most of them (such as Bluff, Diplomacy, and Sense Motive) involve character interaction, but bards also have access to stealth skills (such as Hide and Move Silently), informational skills (such as Decipher Script and Gather Information), and movement skills (such as Balance, Climb, and Jump).
- **Good Reflex and Will Saves:** A bard uses the best save progression in the game for Reflex and Will saves (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*). His natural grace helps him avoid most effects that could deal damage or entrap him, such as area spells, entanglement, and many traps. The fact that the bard also uses the best progression for Will saves allows him to withstand assaults on his mind or spirit.
- **Bardic Music:** A bard's music (or poetry) literally makes magic. With it, he can counter most sound-based effects, inspire his allies, and even bend others to his will. To get the most out of his bardic music abilities, however, he has to keep buying ranks of Perform throughout his career.
- **Bardic Knowledge:** A bard has at least a slight chance to know something about almost anything.
- **Spells:** A bard has access to spells that heal allies, stymie enemies, or provide other useful effects. Bard spells generally aren't flashy, but they can be quite effective when used with forethought and skill. And a bard doesn't have to carry spellbooks; he can choose a personal repertoire of spells that he can cast anytime. He does have a daily limit on the number of spells of each level he can cast, but he can freely cast any spell he knows until he reaches that limit. So he doesn't have to guess ahead of time which spells to prepare -- if he needs to cast a particular spell several times in the same day, he can do so.

Bard Weaknesses

As with characters of other classes, the bard's many advantages come at a price. Here are a few of the disadvantages you should keep in mind if you're considering a bard character.

- **Poor Fortitude Saving Throws:** Bards have the worst progression for Fortitude saves in the game (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*). Thus, they aren't so great at shrugging off effects that attack their bodies.
- **Fairly Low Hit Points:** The bard's 6-sided Hit Dice give him only a moderate number of hit points. But even though he can't take much physical punishment, he does need to enter combat occasionally because his spells don't pack much offensive punch.
- **Fairly Low Armor Class:** The fact that a bard has proficiency with only light armor and shields other than tower shields leaves him with only a mediocre Armor Class. The combination of modest hit points and middling Armor Class usually means that a bard can afford to fight a little, but he doesn't have much staying power in a pitched battle. To make matters worse, donning medium or heavy armor may cause his arcane spells to fail. A bard can improve his defenses in various ways, but all of them deplete his resources.
- **Limited Spell Choices:** Once a bard chooses spells, his repertoire remains more or less fixed, except for new additions as he attains higher levels. He has a limited ability to change his repertoire, but for the most part, he is stuck with whatever spells he has chosen.

Playing a Classy Bard

Great bards usually use the following techniques, so if you're playing one, try to build your strategy around these concepts.

Staying on Top of Things

Your ability to win friends and influence people isn't worth much if your party tends to slay first and ask questions later. Thus, you should always be ready to talk about options with intelligent foes. Furthermore, you need to move quickly when an encounter begins, so that you have a chance to exchange a few words with opponents before swords and spells fly.

On the other hand, your ability call up obscure information can be a real lifesaver when a baffling situation arises. So be ready to ask some questions that can get to the heart of the matter when you see the game grinding to a halt.

Your spell selection greatly influences the contributions that you can make during an encounter, so it pays to choose spells that keep your options open. A good mix includes a few offensive spells (though not many are available to you), some defensive spells, and some miscellaneous spells for healing damage, boosting ability scores, and expanding your personal capabilities.

With your skills, spells, class features, and combat ability, you can respond to an encounter in any number of ways. A quick analysis of the situation should help you choose the best option, so always think before you act.

Power Multiplier

As a bard, you can make a big impact on the game by working through others, so be prepared to lend your support

whenever you can. Your inspire courage ability can boost your whole party simultaneously, and you can use inspire competence to assist a friend with just about any task. In addition, spells such as *good hope*, *haste*, *heroism*, and *rage* can give your whole group a boost.

You can also work well with specific members of your party, as noted below.

The Party's Main Fighter: Whoever has to stand in the front line and handle most of the fighting can benefit from *cure light wounds* or other medicinal spells you might have in your repertoire. You also have enough fighting ability to step in and give your party's fighter a hand when the situation gets tough. For example, you might help him by flanking a foe or dealing with an enemy flanker.

The Party's Scout: Your divination spells (if you have them) and your knack for uncovering obscure information can keep stealthy characters such as rogues, rangers, and monks from getting in over their heads. Furthermore, if misfortune befalls the party's scout, your fighting ability makes you a candidate for the rescue party, and your spells could come in handy -- both during the rescue and for healing the injured scout.

Other Spellcasters: You probably have more hit points and a better Armor Class than the other spellcasters in your group -- except perhaps for the party's druid or cleric. So try to stay close enough to your fellow spellcasters so that you can protect them if a foe breaks through the front line.

Some Key Equipment

The right gear can help you quite a bit with a bardic career. Below are some essential pieces to pack.

- **Armor:** Even though you won't spend all your time in the front lines, some kind of protective gear is essential. As noted earlier, you can use light armor and most shields, and items such as these provide decent protection at a reasonable price. Unfortunately, both shields and medium or heavy armor saddle you with an arcane spell failure chance. If you want to spend more money for less protection, you can load up on defensive magic items such as a ring of protection, an amulet of natural armor, and bracers of armor. You'll probably have a lower Armor Class, but no arcane spell failure chance.
- **Melee Weapon:** You're proficient with simple weapons and a small selection of other weaponry, and you're not by any means helpless in combat, so choose an efficient melee weapon. A longsword or rapier is fairly effective, and a rapier works with the Weapon Finesse feat, which allows you to use your Dexterity bonus for melee attacks -- a handy benefit if you've chosen a high Dexterity score.
- **Backup Melee Weapon:** Always have a light weapon or two handy. A light slashing weapon, such as a dagger or hand axe, can help get you out of a tight spot (for example, being swallowed whole by a big monster). It also pays to have a hefty weapon on hand in case you lose your primary one or find that it isn't effective. Make sure this weapon deals a different kind of damage than your primary weapon does. For example, if you normally use a rapier (a piercing weapon), consider a mace (which deals bludgeoning damage) as a backup. A sap can also prove handy for subduing foes you wish to question later.
- **Ranged Weapon:** You can greatly increase your survival chances by keeping your foes at a distance during combat. A composite shortbow offers good range, and you can make multiple attacks with it if your base attack bonus allows it. Earlier in your career, though, the heavy crossbow may prove a better choice. It has a slow rate of fire, but it deals good damage. And to round out your weapon selection, consider carrying some of those handy daggers and hand axes, which can be thrown as well as used in melee.

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies, and he served as the sage of *Dragon Magazine* for eighteen years. Skip is a codesigner of the **D&D** 3rd edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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